New Regional Initiative Will Help Save the New England Cottontail

By Betty Anderson

In a special initiative to boost dwindling populations of New England cottontail rabbits, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is providing financial and technical support to help private landowners improve suitable habitat.

Assistance is provided to individuals in New Hampshire and other states to implement practices on their land that will aid the cottontail, such as brush management, tree and shrub planting and invasive plant control under the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP). Other conservation practices, such as wetlands and riparian area restoration, water quality improvement, rare wildlife and plant protection and forest trails relocation are funded through the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).

Over the past several decades, both the New England cottontail population and its habitat have been in serious decline due to development, invasive plants, and runoff from development that has degraded shrub wetlands. Scientists estimate that since 1960, the rabbit's historic range in New York and New England has been reduced by 86 percent. As a result of these declining numbers, the New England cottontail was listed as a "candidate species" under the Federal Endangered Species Act in 2006. This means that it is a species of concern that may soon need to be officially listed as endangered under federal law. The Federal Endangered Species Act protects species from extinction because of the possible medicinal, agricultural, ecological, commercial and aesthetic value of each species.

When a species is designated as officially endangered by federal law, regulations come into play for farmers and foresters that can result in fines or taking of land for species habitat growth and improvement. NRCS works with landowners on a volunteer basis to take simple, effective steps now to improve species habitat so regulation under the Endangered Species Act either becomes unnecessary—because the species has rebounded—or so that landowners who do voluntary work to improve habitat are exempt from future regulation. The costs of regulation to taxpayers and landowners will be avoided if the New England cottontail rebounds and does not become an endangered species under the Federal Endangered Species Act.

NRCS, working with partners, will create hundreds of acres of New England cottontail habitat to help the species rebound and thrive. The initiative will also help fifty-nine other species including shrub land birds like the woodcock as well as rare butterflies, moths and amphibians and reptiles. Keeping the species from becoming endangered ensures that this rabbit will not be lost to future generations.

